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Abstract

Residential schools were advertised as a chance for Aboriginal children to have a “free and equal chance with children in urban centers. However, this was far from the case; students were mistreated and taught to despise their Aboriginal culture and embrace European culture. They were presented as free and serene places where children would receive education, be allowed to play and run like any other Canadian school. The reality was far from this picture-perfect image that was presented to the public; students were abused, over-worked and underfed. Assiniboia Indian Residential School was one of the first residential high schools in Manitoba. It offered older children more freedoms compared to other residential schools. Although it was far from perfect, with many aboriginal children facing sexual assault, living structured lives, and being taken away from their families, the school treated students better than most residential schools allowing students to go into the city, work for some pocket money and live less structured lives. The study undertook a critical review with aim of assessing the impacts of Residential Schools.

Keywords: *Residential Schools & Canada*

1.1 Introduction

Residential schools were advertised as a chance for Aboriginal children to have a “free and equal chance with children in urban centers. However, this was far from the case; students were mistreated and taught to despise their Aboriginal culture and embrace European culture. They were presented as free and serene places where Aboriginal children would receive education, be

allowed to play and run like any other Indian school¹. The reality was far from this picture-perfect image that was presented to the public; students were abused, over-worked and underfed. Assiniboia Indian Residential School was one of the first residential high schools in Manitoba. It offered older children more freedoms compared to other residential schools. Although it was far from perfect, with many aboriginal children facing sexual assault, living structured lives, and being taken away from their families, the school treated students better than most residential schools allowing students to go into the city, work for some pocket money and live less structured lives.

2.1 Review of Literature

Mary-Ellen Kelm looks into the ways residential schools played a major role in the reshaping of Aboriginal bodies in the early 21st century. The author uses the case study of residential schools in British Columbia to show the goals and results achieved by these schools. Colonizers held the belief that Indigenous people were “by nature, unclean and diseased,” and residential schools were a method of saving First Nation children from these perceived negative influences from their lives in the reserve². The schools taught Aboriginal children that their Aboriginal domestic practices posed a threat to their physical, social, and spiritual survival; these lessons were reinforced through health education. The students were taught that in order to live a long healthy life, they must welcome cultural alienation.

However, the schools did not improve their students’ health as most students were almost starving and suffered from illnesses and diseases. Instead of taking care of the children in their care, the residential schools put them in danger as they were exposed to diseases, underfed, abused, and overworked. The schools’ major objective was to “re/form Aboriginal bodies,” and they achieved this goal. However, rather than the strong, healthy bodies that would be used for agricultural and domestic labor, the schools produced weaker bodies that brought death and disease to their homes. Residential schools failed as agents of assimilation. After First Nation leaders and parents saw the effects of sending their children to residential schools, they started to protest about the harsh treatment of students in these schools. They protested against the official views of the residential schools in terms of the place of the body in relation to nutrition, culture, discipline, and work. They also rejected the assimilative factors of health education taught and perpetuated in the schools².

The Assiniboia Residential Indian School was unique in that it was the only residential high school in Manitoba, and it was the only residential school in Canada located in a large urban area. The school operated between 1958 and 1973, a time when the residential school system was declining; the school produced artists, knowledge keepers, future leaders, and other notable figures. In many ways, the school was an experiment of the destructive framework of residential schools in Canada. Memories of former school students help to stitch together the socio-historical reconstruction of Assiniboia and the overall residential school system. Student recollections provide a diverse image of student experiences, staff, and neighbors. *Did You See Us?* presents juxtaposed views of the schools according to the experiences of former students.

Assiniboia was different from the other residential schools that most Aboriginal children had attended in their younger years. According to the testimonies from past students in *Did You See Us?* most of them were surprised at the changes they experienced when they started attending Assiniboia. Theodore Fontaine states he and the other students were pleasantly shocked by the food they were fed in Assiniboia. He says that when he had attended Fort Alexander Indian Residential Schools, the students were left mostly hungry and hard to force themselves to eat the “cement-like porridge, miserable pieces of hard bread, bacon grease, boiled and raw potatoes”³ they were served. However, this was far from the case at Assiniboia, where everyone was well fed. Fontaine goes on to say that everyone in the school ate the same food, from the principal to the youngest student. He never went hungry when he was at the school and mainly as fond memories of his time there.

However, Fontaine acknowledges that although the school brought hope to the Indian students who attended there, it was still a residential school. The Indian children were kept away from their homes and family. They had to eat, sleep, live, attend classes and play within the confines of tall wire fences. Fontaine states that there “were both protected and isolated from the white population”³. River Heights had been placed at the forefront of the government’s strategy to assimilate Indian children and ‘protect’ them from their families’ influence. However, not all the residents wanted Indian kids living in their communities. The students were exposed to numerous disturbing incidents that were meant to “belittle and demean their worth as Indians”³. Additionally, they faced racial epithets from the local white teams when they competed in hockey, baseball, football, and track and field meets. Fontaine states that these abuses prepared them for the abuse they would go on to encounter in their adulthood.

Fort Alexander Indian Residential School, which was in Sagkeeng First Nation, only provided classes up to grade eight, meaning that most of the students from the school were transferred to Assiniboia in the district of River Heights in Winnipeg. Dorothy –Ann Crate, a former student who transferred from Fort Alexander to Assiniboia, stated that they had not been informed that they would be moving to another school, and the students did not know what to expect. Some students were excited, and some dreaded the move³. Crate explains the school layout at Assiniboia, where the recreation room was on the main floor on the west side of the school, washrooms were off the hallway on the main floor. Although there was a washroom upstairs, students were not allowed there during school hours unless there was an emergency. There were two big dormitories upstairs, and the beds were arranged in rows.

The boys studied on the other side of the residential schools, and the girls and boys were never allowed to mingle with one another. Even in the school cafeteria, there were “designated sections for boys and girls”³. All the students were assigned school chores and were expected to follow class schedules and school rules that Crate says were not very strict. The students were allowed to smoke at certain times, and they had a canteen after classes. Crate states that the in-school chores were assigned every two weeks, and students would look forward to the work they would be assigned. The girls and boys were assigned chores on their side of the school. Additionally, the school was located in an urban setting, and the students would sometimes ask to go shopping at the T. Eaton Store. Most of the students from the northern part of the country could not go home for the holidays because of the long distance.

Crate states that she did not experience or observe bullying in her school and didn't see fighting or arguing among the girls in the school. The girls were expected to wear appropriate clothes; dresses, blouses, and sweaters that the girls shared with one another. Sports were an important part of the curriculum at Assiniboia. Most of the student interviews in "Did You See Us?" mention that the students participated in sports playing with local teams. Although she did not like sports, Perrault played baseball. Fontaine stated that students could play various games, including hockey, baseball, football, and track and field³.

Most of the students who attended Assiniboia were poor and therefore worked to be able to buy amenities. Perreault states that she never had pocket money to buy the things she needed and therefore asked the school if they could give her some work so she could earn money for toothpaste and other items she needed³. Fontaine also stated that some of the students sought jobs as they didn't have any money. Fontaine and other students were allowed to go to homes near the schools and offer them help with shoveling driveways and sidewalks in order to make some money.

There were numerous cases of students being sexually abused by staff, priests, and nuns in the residential schools. Jimmy Cunningham was sexually assaulted shortly after he enrolled at the Sturgeon Lake school in Calais, Alberta⁴. He told the nuns about his experience, but they didn't believe him and strapped him for lying. He went to the priest, Father Superior, for help, but the priest said he couldn't do anything. The priest sent Cunningham back to the boys' hall and then called the sister to inform her that he had gone to complain about what happened. This resulted in Cunningham being strapped again for going to the Father Superior without asking for her permission³. Some students were too ashamed to report their abuse. Violet Rupp Cook was almost violated by one of the supervisors at Assiniboia school in the school gymnasium. She fought him off, but the experience left her shaken up; she went back to the dorms and never told anyone in the school. She went on to live in fear, unable to do her school work. Elizabeth Good attended the Alberni school and stated that she was abused the whole time she was in the school. She states that she was the youngest student in the school and was abused by three different people in her years in the school; two men and one woman⁴. Roy Dick, who attended Lowe Post Residential School, states that he was sexually assaulted from when he was eight years old by one of the schools' supervisors⁵. Dick felt as though he could not tell anyone because he thought he was the only one being abused, and he feared no one would believe him.

Structure was an important part of residential schools that students in all schools were expected to follow. Caroline Perreault explained the daily routine when she attended Assiniboia. She explains that going to Assiniboia was like moving from black to white when she moved from her home to the school². It was a completely different way of life filled with structure and rules. All their time was structured from the time they woke up to when they went to sleep. Students were expected to wake up by 6:00 am and get ready, so they could attend the chapel at 7:00 am. Students had to go to the chapel every day and then eat breakfast before attending to their chores. She stated that while she had attended Fort Alexander, the meals were always the same food which was usually "a lot of moose meat"³. However, at Assiniboia, some students were assigned to serve the staff their food, and she used to ask herself why they ate food that was different from theirs, which was a different experience from when Fontaine had attended the school. This difference can be attributed to the fact that Sister Ell, who was in charge of the food while

Fontaine had been in Assiniboia, cared about the students and ensured they were always well fed while there was no such caretaker while Perreault was at the school. Perrault recalls that the students learned that they had to concentrate on what they wanted to achieve and study in order to succeed³. Lucille Mattess, who attended Lejac Indian Residential School, states that the school was highly structured. The students had to wake up very early in the morning, and all activities followed a certain structure such that a new activity could not begin before the last one ended⁶. Students would wake up, take their breakfast, perform their chores, get dressed and go to class. They would then go to recess. Mattess stated that students were expected to line up to go everywhere. Their whole lives in the schools were structured so that making your own decisions seemed unnecessary.

Students were not allowed to interact with their siblings even if they attended the same residential school. Perreault recalls that one of the hardest things she missed was the lack of affection in the school. At home, older people took care of the younger ones. However, in the school, the students were not allowed to receive or give affection. They could not receive affection from their parents, families, brothers, or sisters³. Mattess shared that they never received any emotional support; when they cried, no one acknowledged it, and they were expected to lay in bed and cry alone. “Nobody came over to ask, “What is wrong, Lucy?””⁶ Mable Horton states that although she went to Assiniboia with her brothers and sisters, they barely ever interacted with one another in the school. David Montana Wesley says that while he studied in Assiniboia with his sisters, they were always separated and he missed speaking and interacting with them³. Interactions between the girls and boys would lead to being sent to the dorm or some form of penalty. Mattess recalled that she was kept separate from her siblings and was never allowed to contact her siblings⁶. All she could hope for was to spot her siblings across the hall, but they could not share information. Dick stated that all the boys in Lower Post were placed into categories, with the younger boys staying at one side and the older boys in another⁵. Siblings in different categories could not interact with one another.

Parents instilled the value of education into their students. Horton states that her parents taught all their children the importance of paying attention in school and encouraged them to study hard. The parents wanted them to have degrees, careers, and everything they needed to lead successful lives. Her parents did not have the opportunity to receive an education, and they wanted their kids to take advantage of the opportunity they had. Her parents even visited her and her siblings while they were in school to ensure they had all they needed in school. Wesley’s parents shared the same views and told their children they had to work hard in school because they wanted their children to have better lives. Wesley and his siblings had been sent to Indian Day School when they were younger and then sent off to Assiniboia for high school³.

3.1 Conclusion

The reality of residential schools was very different from what most of the parents and students were told about the schools. Students were abused, underfed, separated from their siblings and friends, and forced to live highly structured lives that left most of the students unable to live in the outside world without getting help. Although Assiniboia offered some respite from the extreme structures and separation, it was still a residential school where Indian students were stripped of their culture and forced to assimilate. These schools left many Aboriginal children scarred. This paper covers only a fraction of the abuses that First Nation children suffered in residential schools. It is important that we look at these stories and realize that Aboriginal people are still suffering and there is a need for change.

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